

***Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody, 1968: A Brief Study Guide**

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A. Biography of Anne Moody

Anne Moody was born on September 15, 1940, in Wilkinson County, Mississippi. *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is an autobiographical book about life in Mississippi, the struggle of African Americans in the state and in the South, the life of a black child and woman in the South, and the role of race and racism in America. The book helps us to understand life in the South both before and during the Civil Rights Movement and shows the struggles and triumphs and also the enduring problems that came out of the Movement. It also shows racism from the perspective of a child. The majority of the book focuses on Moody's early years, her experiences at school and also at college. She attended Natchez Junior College on a basketball scholarship and then transferred to the highly respected Historically Black College (HBC) of Tougaloo College in the state capital, Jackson. Anne Moody sees herself as an activist rather than a writer. She worked as a volunteer in the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and participated in many key events of the Civil Rights Movement--the Woolworth Sit-Ins, The March on Washington D.C., marches in Mississippi, the Mississippi Freedom Summer--, and she worked with many Civil Rights Leaders. The book begins with Anne Moody at the age of four and ends when she is 24 years old in 1964. At that time Anne Moody moved north to Cornell University in New York to work as a Civil Rights Coordinator—however, she became disillusioned with the Civil Rights Movement and eventually left it.

B. The Structure of the Book

The book is divided into four sections: Section I: Childhood; Section II: High School; Section III: College; Section IV: The Movement.

Section I: Childhood (1-123)

This section of the book outlines Anne Moody's (her name is Essie Mae) early life as a sharecropper, the terrible poverty that her family endured, family tensions, the constant moving of the family, the break-up of her parents' marriage, and the move to Centerville. Anne Moody experiences Jim Crow (legalized segregation) at an early age. The book also discusses competition and tensions within the black community, the black churches, religion and belief, and folk medicines. Anne Moody begins school and is a very good student, competitive and hardworking. She is also a hard worker outside the home as a cleaner. The family gets poorer and moves to smaller and smaller houses throughout this section of the autobiography. Anne Moody's income helps to provide food and clothes for the entire family.

Section II: High School (127-232)

This section of the book delineates Anne Moody's experiences at high school and her teenage years. As she becomes older, her eyes are opened to the terrible racial problems and violence towards African Americans in Mississippi. This section begins with the lynching of Emmett Till and its effect on the black community. Anne Moody becomes aware of the Civil Rights

Movement (CRM) and the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Anne Moody becomes sick of people and tired of Centerville. She lives in Baton Rouge for a time and works there but returns to Centerville. She continues to excel at high school and is an excellent basketball player. She tutors a group of whites (schools are segregated) but this causes tensions. She spends a summer in New Orleans and works in a chicken factory as a strike breaker and finally finds work in a restaurant. Her eyes are opened to the world in New Orleans, and she is now bored in Centerville. Anne Moody becomes a young woman and changes her appearance and dress. She suffers from attempted sexual advances from men, including her mother's partner, Raymond, and this causes immense problems in the family. She eventually leaves home. Anne Moody graduates from high school in 1959. She receives a basketball scholarship to attend Natchez Junior College. She spends her summer in New Orleans but makes little money.

Section III: College (235-280)

In the shortest section of the book, Anne Moody begins her college career at Natchez. She is very excited and nervous about college but is disappointed with Natchez. There are tensions with some teachers and the administration. Anne Moody is strong, organized, and opinionated. She is a loner but works hard on the basketball team and does well in classes. In her second year she has her first boyfriend and goes through a changing relationship. She protests against the condition of the food at the college and leads a demonstration—foreshadowing her role in the CRM. After two years she transfers to Tougaloo College. She wins a talent show there and makes some friends. She has her first experience of white teachers and was scared at first but notices that there are differences between whites. She gets more interested in the CRM and meets many leaders, such as Medgar Evers. Anne Moody begins to get wrapped up in the CRM, which hurts her grades, and becomes friends with workers in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). At the end of the section Anne Moody starts her own sit-in at a bus station in the Delta but learns she needs planning and others to help her.

Section IV: The Movement (283-424)

In the final section of the book, Anne Moody exhaustively describes her experiences in the CRM. This part of the autobiography is full of amazing events, highs and lows, tensions and problems, and shows Anne Moody reflecting on the experiences and what it tells her about life. One gets a great sense of why Anne Moody becomes so involved, her exhaustion from overwork and stress, the huge tensions it causes with her family, the very real possibility of white violence and intimidation and the almost complete opposition of the white community in Mississippi (with a few exceptions) to equality and an end to segregation, disfranchisement, and racism. Anne Moody is involved with the Woolworth Sit-In in Jackson, mass rallies, and demonstrations. The murder of Medgar Evers in 1963 had a profound effect on Anne Moody and signals more militancy in CORE and SNCC. Anne Moody moves to Canton to work on a voter registration drive. This is very difficult area to organize because of black apathy and white violence. Anne Moody goes to the March on Washington. In Canton, she is finally on SNCC's payroll and gets food and clothes to help the poor. She has a crisis of faith. Although she opposes the Freedom Vote Campaign, Anne Moody works hard as a volunteer in 1963. Exhausted and unwell, Anne Moody leaves Canton and goes to New Orleans. She feels estranged from her family and gets

involved with CORE in the city. She finally graduates from Tougaloo. In the Summer of 1964 Anne Moody works hard with the Mississippi Freedom Summer—a huge campaign to educate African Americans and get them to vote. The program also provides clinics, schools and social services to the poor. She returns to Canton and works hard. Her book ends in doubt.

C. Key Issues in the Book

The autobiography is a wonderful mix of personal and historical events that shape Anne Moody's life over time. Each informs the other. The following is a brief list of some key issues that would make for a lively discussion:

Personal Issues

Family Life
Poverty in Mississippi
Growing Up and Changing
Becoming a Woman
Dating/Love/Sex
Broadening of Horizons
Working as a Domestic
Living in New Orleans
Finding Our Own Identity
Religion and Belief
Making Decisions
High School Life
Being a Black Girl and Woman
Going to College—Transitions
Courage, Sense of Mission, Character

Civil Rights/Race Issues in Mississippi

Effects of Racism on Everyday Life
Poverty in Mississippi
Black-White Relations and Racism
Internal Black and Internal White Relations
Deaths of Emmett Till and Medgar Evers
Lynchings, Murders and Violence
Police, KKK, and Intimidation in MS
Civil Rights Groups and Approaches
Ways of Organizing in the CRM
Mississippi Freedom Summer
Difficulties in Grassroots Activism
Student Sit-Ins, Marches, Organizing
Generational Differences in the CRM
What the CRM Meant to African Americans
Legacy of the CRM on MS and the South

D. Questions to Consider

There are many questions from *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. The following are some discussion questions (there are many more):

1. What were Anne Moody's most significant early childhood experiences? What was her family life like? What tensions existed in the family? What sort of responsibilities did she have in her family? What was life like as a sharecropper?
2. Outline Anne Moody's interactions with whites in her early life. How did she learn that African Americans and whites were different and what effect did this have on her?
3. What problems did Anne Moody's family experience as they tried to advance? What seemed to stop them being successful? How did poverty affect their lives?
4. Outline the relationships between Anne Moody and the first whites she worked for? What sort of work did she do? What was her relationship like with Mrs. Burke and how and why did this deteriorate over time? What does this indicate to you?

5. Who was Emmett Till and why was he lynched? What was the reaction of Anne Moody and also the black community to his death? What does this tell you?
6. As Anne Moody grows up she becomes more critical of African Americans and their relationship to whites. Why? How did she act differently from other Blacks in rural Mississippi? What problems did this create in her family?
7. Anne Moody's relationship with her mother changed over time. What were the causes of this change and what specific events caused problems?
8. In the book, Anne Moody spends some time in the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. How did these places affect her? Were African Americans treated differently in those places? What differences did she experience in African American life?
9. Why was Samuel O'Quinn murdered and what did this do to Anne Moody?
10. What kind of high school student was Anne Moody? What motivated her to succeed? Why did she begin to play basketball? What problems did she endure as she grew older? How did she cope with these issues?
11. Why did Anne Moody want to go to college? What happened to her at Natchez? Why did she decide to transfer?
12. What fears did Anne Moody have about going to Tougaloo College? What friends did she make there and what experiences did she have that helped her growth?
13. How did Anne Moody get involved with the Tougaloo branch of the NAACP? How did this involvement influence her? What specific events was she involved in?
14. Describe Anne Moody's work with the SNCC voter registration project. What made it hard for her and her friends to achieve success? Why were African Americans very reluctant to register? How did whites try to stop the work of SNCC? What dangers did she face?
15. Outline Anne Moody's role in the Woolworth Sit-Ins. How was this planned and what happened? Why did this have a profound impact on her?
16. What was the reaction of Anne Moody to the death of Medgar Evers?
17. What was the reaction of Anne Moody to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech? What does her trip up to Washington DC tell you?
18. Why was organizing in Canton so much more difficult than in Jackson? What specific problems did she endure? What was she so exhausted?

19. Why does the book end in the way it does? What does this tell you about the CRM? Does Anne Moody believe that it is possible to overcome racial prejudice and discrimination? What do you think?

E. Bibliography

There are many excellent books on the Civil Rights Movement and also specifically on Mississippi. The following list is a good starting point.

Mississippi and the Civil Rights Movement

Kenneth T. Andrews, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: The Civil Rights Movement and its Legacy* (2004).

John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (1994).

Aaron Henry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (2000).

Chana Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (1999).

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Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and the Civil Rights in Mississippi* (2004).

Adam Nossiter, *Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (1994).

Frank Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi after 1965* (1990).

Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (1995).

General Histories of the Modern Civil Rights Movement Up to 1965

Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1964-1968* (1988).

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981).

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Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (1993).